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ACCOUNTABILITY: THE MOST UNDERAPPRECIATED  
ASPECT OF COMMAND

by

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Battema is a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He graduated from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, Arizona in 1992 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Aeronautical Science, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in 2005 with a Masters of Aeronautical Science Management Applications, and Air Command and Staff College in 2006 with a Masters of Military Art and Science. He earned his missile badge in 1993, pilot wings in 1997, and naval aviator wings in 2004. A graduated fighter squadron commander, he has logged nearly 2,300 flying hours in the T-3, T-37, T-38, F-16, and F-18E/F.



## **Abstract**

Air Force commanders at every level are accountable for the actions, successes, and failures of their command and those under their command; it is the most underappreciated aspect of command. This paper examines two senior officer accountability events: the 2007 Minot-Barksdale AFB nuclear incident in which six nuclear weapons were transported with neither authorization nor knowledge of the Airmen involved and the 1994 B-52 crash at Fairchild AFB. In each, senior commanders were held accountable for the actions and inaction of others. In the former, three commanders are scrutinized for their role and willingness to be held to account. In the latter, base-level commanders were relieved and the Air Force Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Air Force were forced to resign. Yet intermediate commanders seem to have been untouched calling into question “skip-echelon” command structures and general officer accountability. High-profile events as these seem to draw, like a vacuum, scrutiny from the public and political officials – someone must be held accountable. The transparency necessary to satisfy public opinion is often crippled by slow and incomplete Department of Defense communication of accountability actions taken against its officers. Attempts to preserve privacy concerns of admonished officers only further muddy the waters and result in the appearance of cover-up, even when none exist. For these same reasons, commanders themselves, particularly junior commanders, are largely unaware of what command accountability really is. Therefore, Air Force and DoD officials need to be more forthright and public in their conclusions and deliberately teach burgeoning officers about the burden they bear.

## **Introduction**

“I assume command.” With three solemn words, two weighty realities follow. First, the full force of, and responsibility to, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) is imposed on the new commander. Second, the full weight of accountability for the actions, successes, and failures of the unit is placed squarely on the shoulders of the incoming commander.

Senior Air Force officers have been relieved of command and/or held accountable seemingly ad hoc. This paper examines two senior officer accountability events. In each, senior commanders were held accountable for actions of those under their command. The first is the Minot-Barksdale nuclear incident. In August 2007, six nuclear weapons not authorized for removal from storage or transport, were loaded on a B-52 and flown across North America. Two squadron commanders, two group commanders, and a wing commander were relieved. A year later, the Air Force Chief of Staff (CSAF) and Secretary were forced to retire, yet both the 8th Air Force and Air Combat Command (ACC) commanders emerged apparently unscathed.

The second is the 1994 Fairchild AFB B-52 crash which killed four aircrew. The squadron commander was unable to influence his commanders to ground an unsafe pilot and consequently vowed he would always fly with the rouge pilot to protect his crews; perishing in the accident, he paid the ultimate price of accountability. In the aftermath, the group commander was court-martialed and subsequently retired. The wing commander testified at the court-martial in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

The paper concludes with an analysis of the events to answer the question, “How, and to what extent, are consequences and officer accountability standardized across the AF, or are they open to the discretion of the commander?”

## **Minot-Barksdale Nuclear Incident, 2007**

*One of the major tenets of our military is accountability.*

- Senator James Inhofe, Oklahoma

### **Situation**

*Bent Spear.* On 29 August 2007, a B-52 loaded with six nuclear cruise missiles “not properly prepared for flight and still containing classified material” flew from Minot AFB, North Dakota to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana – no one knew there were nuclear weapons on board.<sup>1</sup> The warheads were never armed and were in Air Force custody at all times,<sup>2</sup> but were not discovered until Airmen at Barksdale inspected the missiles prior to transport to the weapon storage area. “During the incident there was never any unsafe condition and the incident was promptly reported to our national leadership including the secretary of defense and the president.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, “during what had become a routine effort to realign nuclear cruise missiles without warheads between Minot and Barksdale,”<sup>4</sup> six US nuclear weapons went unaccounted for and “no one even missed them, for 36 hours.”<sup>5</sup> In the 60-year US nuclear weapons history, “no breach of nuclear procedures of this magnitude ever occurred.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Actors**

Following the event, seven commanders, including one wing commander, two group commanders, and three squadron commanders, were relieved.<sup>7</sup> In 2008, the Secretary of Defense called for the resignations of the Secretary of the Air Force, Michael W. Wynne and General T. Michael Moseley, CSAF.

### **Outcome**

The US government conducted three major investigations. General Keys, the Air Combat Command Commander (ACC/CC), immediately commissioned a commander directed

investigation (CDI) to ascertain the unit-level root causes; this report remains classified.

However, the Department of Defense (DoD) Inspector General (IG) provided CDI oversight and released an unclassified document containing broad-brush details. The Air Force also conducted a Blue Ribbon Review (BRR) of the incident and the nuclear mission as a whole. Finally, Secretary Gates commissioned an independent review resulting in the Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force headed by retired CSAF General Larry Welch.

The six-week CDI concluded this was, “an isolated incident [based on] an erosion of adherence to weapons-handling standards at Minot...[and] Barksdale Air Force Base[s].”<sup>8</sup> In testimony to the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Brigadier General Darnell also laid the errors at “the unit level leadership” and a lack of discipline in “a small group of Airmen at Barksdale and Minot AFBs.”<sup>9</sup> Yet this seems to conflict with his later testimony that the “Air Force focus on the nuclear mission has diminished since 1991...and during the decline in nuclear experience, conventional experience grew exponentially...with almost half the Airmen it had during the Cold War.”<sup>10</sup> A former Minot B-52 operations/weapons officer agrees:<sup>11</sup>

If you had asked me about the nuke mission prior to the incident I would have told you the mission would go away for Barksdale within a year...the wing exercises were mere shadows of those in the ‘90s. The wing commander told me the mission was not going away, but that we would not be required to maintain the same proficiency. I thought if we ever tried to put guys back on alert, it would take months or years to regain the old level of competence. Even then, I was stunned at the actions leading to the transfer.

If the CDI implied the incident was the mistake of a few Airmen and not a systemic leadership issue, Senator Inhofe of Oklahoma didn’t buy it. “[The] CDI concludes this to have been an isolated incident and the result of the actions of just a few Airmen...[yet] there are other conclusions that speak to long-term degradation of discipline and adherence to established procedures...these conclusions seem at odds with each other.”<sup>12</sup>

The BRR and DSB reports also agreed with the base-level root cause errors, but determined the systemic issue was not isolated, but a “declining focus on the strategic nuclear bomber mission”<sup>13</sup> and the bomber force had become “overwhelmingly conventional operations focused”<sup>14</sup> due to atrophy of the larger nuclear mission in the Air Force.<sup>15</sup> This decline seems to have begun with “the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union”<sup>16</sup> evidenced by the bomber units last practicing nuclear alert in September 1992.<sup>17</sup> B-52 crews estimate “5-20% of their time [was] spent on the nuclear mission.”<sup>18</sup>

General Welch’s team acknowledged the Airmen’s tactical-level errors but “found this change in the level of focus on the nuclear enterprise to be DoD-wide.”<sup>19</sup> In the Air Force specifically, the DSB reported “ICBM forces remain tightly focused on their mission,”<sup>20</sup> implying the issue was largely resident in the now nuclear/conventional-integrated B-52 community. The declining focus was part of a larger list of issues.<sup>21</sup>

These do not seem like “unit level” issues but rather senior leader issues – at the most senior levels. General Welch agrees: “...if you search...for statements from the senior leadership emphasizing the importance of the strategic nuclear mission...you will search in vain.”<sup>22</sup> So the question of accountability is raised. Who bears this cross? In the end, for the “most egregious breach of nuclear procedures”<sup>23</sup> in history, the highest-ranking officer held accountable was the wing commander – a colonel.

### **Accountability**

Secretary Gates fired senior Army officers following disclosures of poor services to wounded veterans and “pushed into retirement...generals closely associated with a faltering strategy in Iraq.”<sup>24</sup> So it is little wonder the DoD IG oversight team asked, “Did the Air Force...reasonably assign accountability?”<sup>25</sup> “[The] Air Force investigation identified...



individuals at the *wing level and below*...whose dereliction may warrant disciplinary action,”<sup>26</sup> but not above the wing level.

## Relieved

Secretary Gates announced, “a substantial number of AF general officers and colonels have been identified as potentially subject to disciplinary measures.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, only two above the grade of colonel were held accountable, but not exclusively for this event. In June 2008, nearly a year after the incident, Secretary Gates sent Deputy Defense Secretary England “to ask for Wynne’s resignation...[he] resigned during the meeting.”<sup>28</sup>

Following a summons to meet with Secretary Gates, General Moseley resigned. “Having completed almost 37 years of active service, I request transfer to the Retired List to be effective on the first day of August 2008.”<sup>29</sup> “I think the honorable thing to do is step aside.”<sup>30</sup>

According to an unnamed senior official, the *excuse* and *reason* officers are relieved sometimes differ.<sup>31</sup> The *excuse* was Secretary Gates’ “decision to seek their resignations ‘based entirely’ on the Admiral Donald report which uncovered a ‘gradual erosion of nuclear standards and a lack of effective oversight by Air Force leadership,’”<sup>32</sup> and “a pattern of poor performance” w/ nuclear military components.<sup>33</sup> The *reason* was “The SECDEF didn’t trust Moseley...[and] his very close relationship with to president caused him to be suspicious of him;” the Donald Report<sup>\*</sup> was designed to “dig up the dirt Gates needed to relieve Moseley.”<sup>34</sup>

One cannot conclude General Moseley was relieved solely for the Minot-Barksdale incident. During his watch, four Mk-12 nuclear nose cones were shipped to Taiwan;<sup>35</sup> two major acquisitions programs were stalled by protests; his (apparent) inability to rush more drones into war zones; (alleged) conflicts of interest related to a \$50M multimedia show for the

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<sup>\*</sup> The Donald report was an investigation into the nuclear components erroneously shipped to Taiwan, not the Minot-Barksdale incident. The investigating team contained no Air Force representation.

Thunderbirds; and repeated clashes with Pentagon leaders over the F-22 fleet all contributed.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, Colonel Bruce Emig bears the dubious distinction of being the highest-ranking officer held accountable solely for this incident. A command B-52 pilot, he assumed command of the 5th Bomb Wing on 5 June 2007 – just 87 days before the incident. In October 2008, following the CDI, General John Corley, the new ACC/CC, relieved him.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Colonel Lundell, 5th MXG/CC, Colonel Westhauser, 2nd OG/CC,<sup>38</sup> the 96th BMS/CC,<sup>39</sup> the 5th MXS/CC,<sup>40</sup> and the 5th MUNS/CC<sup>41</sup> were relieved of their commands.

### Not Relieved

In 2007, all B-52 aircraft were assigned to ACC through 8th Air Force. (Fig. 1) Though “discussions among top officials over whether disciplinary action should go higher up the command chain, perhaps to include some generals,”<sup>42</sup> none were. Notably absent from the list are the Major Command and the Numbered Air Force (NAF) commanders. Why?

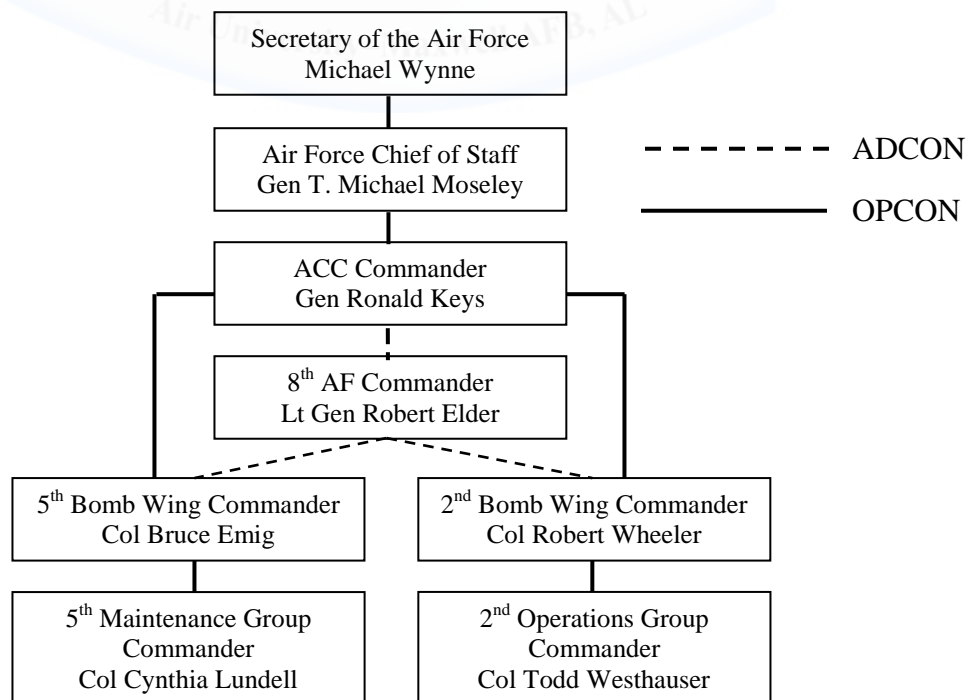


Figure 1. Operational Chain of Command

General Ronald Keys, ACC/CC was not relieved nor is there any public record of his being admonished. After more than two years as ACC/CC, General Keys announced his retirement in June 2007, two months before the incident.<sup>43</sup> This may have been the reason no action was taken against him. But does not the greatest breach of nuclear procedures in history merit some general officer accountability? After all, General Moseley was “admonished”<sup>44</sup> after his retirement for less serious, and unproven, allegations.<sup>†</sup>

Lieutenant General Elder, 8th AF/CC, and the first general officer in the chain of command, was not relieved. However, the DoD IG noted, “any potential accountability for the incident at 8th AF headquarters was limited from the inception of the tactical ferry missions, as that organization was not an action addressee on the ACC Repositioning Order.”<sup>45</sup> “On March 14 2007, an ACC Repositioning Order directed repositioning of cruise missiles. [The] 2nd and 5th Bomb Wings were action addressees...8th AF was an information addressee.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite the fact the “2nd Bomb Wing appear[s] to have unilaterally reduced the number of times they exercised bombers to meet STRATCOM’s plans,”<sup>47</sup> Colonel Robert Wheeler, 2nd BW/CC was not relieved. Perhaps he was not relieved because he assumed command just 34 days before the incident. However, the Minot MXG/CC had only been in command a few weeks and was relieved. According to former 8th AF/CC, Lieutenant General Robert Elder, Colonel Wheeler was retained because his Barksdale team caught the error, appropriately handled the situation, and quickly up-channeled to senior leadership.<sup>48</sup> As of this writing, Wheeler continues to serve on active duty as a major general (select).

During research for this paper, the author learned a new term: skip-echelon. In essence,

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<sup>†</sup> General T. Michael Moseley was issued a Letter of Admonishment 3 months after his retirement for the appearance of impropriety. His public rebuttal expressed frustration with “factual inaccuracies” in the investigation which resulted in “flawed and biased” conclusions. See: *Donley admonishes former Chief of Staff Moseley*, Michael Hoffman, Military Times. Oct 8, 2009.

the interpretation of skip-echelon in AFI 38-101 relieves the NAF, groups, and flights of responsibility for issues in their organizations due to reduced manning in those organizations.<sup>‡</sup> B-52s were “assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> AF...[but due to skip-echelon] had no day-to-day responsibility for B-52 operations, training, or maintenance.”<sup>49</sup> In a phone interview, Lieutenant General Elder said, “the bomb wings reported directly to ACC through the A3 and A4. I was in the admin chain only – awards, decorations, OPRs – I had no command authority.”<sup>50</sup>

In discussions during a visit to Air War College in 2007, Lieutenant General Elder is reported to have said were it not for skip-echelon, he might have been relieved. “But, the honorable thing would have been to offer his resignation anyway.”<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

Accountability in the Minot-Barksdale nuclear incident was far-reaching and enduring – 65 Airmen were relieved of command, removed from their positions of responsibility, or decertified in the nuclear mission, but none higher than the wing-level.

To their credit, “neither wing commander gave any indication accountability for the incident went above the wing level.”<sup>52</sup> The findings of three separate and independent investigations clearly indicate the larger issue of nuclear “erosion” – a storm which had been brewing for more than 15 years – rests fully on the shoulders of the highest levels of Air Force senior leadership, not at the tactical Airman level. And while one might applaud the willingness of the two wing commanders to be held accountable, the blogger’s underlying question, “Does anyone know what the final disposition was for the two brave colonels who stood in the line of fire for their superiors,”<sup>53</sup> is valid.

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<sup>‡</sup> “1.2.4 “Skip-Echelon Structure,” states in part that “Major Commands sit on top of a skip-echelon staffing structure. MAJCOMs, wings, and squadrons possess the full range of staff functions needed to preform required tasks; numbered air forces, groups, and flights have no or minimal staff. These tactical echelons are designed to increase operational effectiveness rather than to review and transmit paperwork.” AFI 38-101, “Air Force Organization” 4 April, 2006.

Was Lieutenant General Elder acquitted on a technicality? “In the good ole SAC days, wing commanders were fired on a regular basis for things like errors in the maintenance log on a nuclear weapons trailer. This was huge in comparison.”<sup>54</sup> If according to AFI NAFs and groups are skip-echelon commands, then should the two group commanders have been held accountable? And for the most egregious breach of US nuclear security in history, should not the accountability chain have gone above the wing level? It seems the answer is *yes*, to both.



## **B-52 Crash, Fairchild AFB, 1994**

*On the day of the crash when we were flying into Fairchild, we had two instructor pilots on board who just PCS'd from Fairchild. Us young crewmembers were talking excitedly about going to our first airshow. The instructors told us not to go "because he is going to kill people; we can only hope he doesn't put it into the crowd." I remember thinking how they must be exaggerating – that certainly there could be no one who was that dangerous and would be allowed to fly. A couple hours later I learned I was wrong.*

- Fred Frostic, Colonel, USAF

### **Situation**

On 24 June 1994, a B-52, call sign Czar-52, crashed at Fairchild Air Force Base during practice maneuvers for the annual base airshow. Following the profile, the air traffic controller instructed the B-52 to go-around because another aircraft was on the runway. The pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Holland requested, and was approved for, a 360-degree turn at mid-field. Approximately 270 degrees through the turn, the eight-engine bomber rolled sharply left and impacted the ground killing all four Airmen on board and narrowly missing the control tower and weapons storage area; no one on the ground was hurt.<sup>55</sup>

### **Actors**

Nearly every aviation mishap results from a chain of events. Any link, if broken, prevents the mishap. But the chain must be deliberately and forcibly broken; this one was not, despite many links over multiple years. In just three years before the crash, four wing commanders, three wing operations group commanders, and five squadron commanders were exposed to Lieutenant Colonel Holland's dangerous flying.<sup>56</sup> This section examines three individuals for their accountability examples: Lieutenant Colonel Mark McGeehan, 325th BMS/CC; Colonel William Pellerin, 92nd OG/CC; and Colonel William Brooks, 92nd BW/CC.

### **Outcome**

This case has been studied perhaps more than any other for safety and accountability.

Books have been written and the case study has served, and continues to serve, for its example at USAF professional military education (PME) and human factors courses.<sup>57</sup> This chapter will not rehash this well-documented event with the previously answered question, “Why did senior leaders permit a ‘rogue pilot’ to continue to fly, despite voluminous first-hand evidence he was indeed rogue and would eventually kill himself and others?” Rather, this analysis will examine the leadership accountability of Fairchild AFB leaders and ask the question, “Did Lieutenant Colonel McGeehan and Colonel Pellerin embody the spirit of accountability and, by contrast, did Colonel Brooks not do so by testifying at Colonel Pellerin’s court-martial in exchange for immunity from prosecution?”

### **Damning History**

Between May 1991 and June 1994, Holland flew seven well-documented, unsafe events any of which were cause for grounding.<sup>§</sup> (Table. 1) Two or three of these would have been singular enough to bring Holland before a Flight Evaluation Board for permanent removal from flying status or even possibly losing his wings. By all accounts, Holland was an accomplished, respected, and highly skilled B-52 pilot. As the 92nd Wing Chief of Standardization and Evaluation, one expects Holland knew the rules better than any other. And yet year after year, as Fairchild’s “Mr. Airshow,” he publicly flew the B-52 well beyond technical order limits violating USAF and federal regulations. Yet, “there is no evidence to indicate commanders at any level took disciplinary action as a result of Holland’s flight activities.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>§</sup> A compilation video of many of the events can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQa4PpIkOZU>. All of these were available to commanders or seen by them in person in 1991-94.

In the three years prior to the accident, these seven highly visible incidents went almost





Event	Infraction	Reaction	Commanders
May 19 1991 Fairchild Airshow	Overflew the audience Well below Federal Aviation Regulations (FAR) altitudes <100' flyby Wingover Aerobatics Extremely steep bank turns High pitch angles	"The entire wing staff sat by and watched him do it [violate regulations] in the '91 air show... what is the sense in saying anything?"  <b>No action taken.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col Harper WG/DO: Col Capolosti WG/CC: Col Wehman
July 12 1991 325th Bomb Squadron Change of Command Flyover	Wingover Aerobatics Extremely steep bank turns High pitch angles	"...the huge B-52 flew so low it blew [my] hat off as [I] stood at attention for the ceremony." "lea dershup had a ring side seat and did nothing about it" <b>Possibly a verbal counseling, no evidence of documented punishment.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col Harper Lt Col Schmidt WG/DO: Col Capolosti WG/CC: Col Wehman
May 17 1992 Fairchild Airshow	60° climb out after low approach "Hammerhead aerobatics"	"More dramatic and lower altitudes [than in 1991]" "...getting a way with it once you could understand...but this was the third time in less than a year. I was appalled, but not surprised." "popped 500 rivets and fuel flowed from the vent holes on top of the wing tanks." <sup>§§</sup>  <b>No action taken.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col Schmidt WG/DO: Col Capolosti WG/CC: Col Ruotsale <sup>§</sup>
April 14-15 1993 Global Power Mission	Flew close formation (prohibited) Shot video from the bomb bay (prohibited) Steep turns over audience Extremely low alt flight	OG/CD: "I would not show any of [the video]" OG/CC: "ok, I don't want to know anything about that video - I don't care."  <b>No action taken.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col Bullock WG/DO: Col Capolosti WG/CC: BGen Richards
August 8 1993 Fairchild Airshow	Steep turns over audience Extremely low alt flight	<b>No action taken.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col Russell** WG/DO: Col Pellerin WG/CC: BGen Richards
10 Mar 1994 Yakima Bomb Range	High-pitch maneuver estimated 80° nose high 30' and 3' ridge crossings (copilot saved the aircraft and crew by taking the controls during the 3' pass)	McGeehan confronted Holland and recommended grounding to Pellerin.  Pellerin verbally admonished but did not ground Holland.	SQ/CC: Lt Col McGeehan WG/DO: Col Pellerin WG/CC: Col Brooks
17 Jun 1994 Fairchild Airshow Practice	Large bank angle turns and high pitch climbs in violation of ACC regulations and technical order guidance	Pellerin on board: "the profile looks good... very safe, well within parameters"  Brooks: "this was not supposed to be happening... was too low and banking over too hard"  <b>No action taken.</b>	SQ/CC: Lt Col McGeehan WG/DO: Col Pellerin WG/CC: Col Brooks

Table 1, Data derived from *Darker Shades of Blue*, Kern, pages 13-20

<sup>§</sup> Col Ruotsale had been the 92d WG/CV during the '91 airshow and change of command. It isn't known whether he had any information regarding these events but is reasonable to assume he was present for both.

\*\* Lt Col Russell was an interim commander awaiting Major McGeehan to pin on Lt Col and assume command after Lt Col Russell was relieved following an OSI investigation. (Court documents: Colonel Brooks testimony at Colonel Pellerin court-martial, 22 Nov 95, Pg 39).

completely ignored; wing aircrew began to take matters into their own hands. Following a

March 1994 Yakima Bomb Range incident, aircrews categorically refused to fly with Holland under any circumstance, even if ordered.<sup>59</sup> McGeehan confronted Holland and brought his concerns to his boss Colonel Pellerin, who listened to both sides of the story and issued Holland an (undocumented) verbal reprimand, but did not ground him as McGeehan had requested.

## **Accountability**

### **325th Bomber Squadron Commander**

As a squadron commander, McGeehan's first disciplinary encounter with Holland's reckless flying was the Yakima Bomb Range incident in which Holland "nearly crashed a B-52 ...by flying too low over a ridge, and demanded Holland be grounded."<sup>60</sup> Following this incident McGeehan resolved he would safeguard his Airmen's lives with his own; he would never again let Holland endanger his Airmen so long as he was in command. "The very morning of the accident flight, my Dad ordered one of his junior pilots, Capt Mark Thomas, off of the aircraft."<sup>61</sup> McGeehan's wife testified, "Mark...was not going to let Lieutenant Colonel Holland fly with anybody else unless he was in the airplane...he was going to be flying whenever Bud flew."<sup>62</sup> True to his words, three months later, McGeehan died in the fiery crash with Holland. He lived up to his word and paid the ultimate price of accountability.

### **92nd Operations Group Commander**

On 17 June 1994, Colonel Pellerin flew with Holland during an airshow practice as a safety observer. He reported to Colonel Brooks, "...everything looks well in parameters, limitations, and looks good."<sup>63</sup> But Brooks knew that was inaccurate. He had been outdoors during part of the flight and verbally said, "this was not supposed to be happening...[Holland] was too low and banking over too hard."<sup>64</sup> But no one took action.

Senior Fairchild officers ignoring, and even encouraging, rogue flying had become

acceptable. Several years prior, during a two-ship low level flight across the desert, Holland flew his jet so low it kicked up a rooster tail of dust. The vice wing commander was in the other B-52.<sup>65</sup> When he saw it, he encouraged his junior pilot to descend and do the same.<sup>66</sup>

Colonel Pellerin “was not the only [senior leader] who received complaints about Holland’s flying. For several years...top Fairchild officials received similar reports or were present when he flew dangerous maneuvers for airshows” and over the Spokane community.<sup>67</sup> But none of these officers received any disciplinary action for these events or their lack of intervention.<sup>68</sup> The buck stopped at Colonel Pellerin.

Following the crash, the 12th Air Force Commander, Lieutenant General Thomas Griffith, \*\* court-martialed Pellerin charging him with “three counts of dereliction of duty: failure to obtain proper approval for the airshow maneuvers, failure to ensure a safe routine, and failure to ground Holland after repeated violations of Air Force safety regulations.”<sup>69</sup> In testimony, he admitted “inexcusably poor judgment,” that he should have done more to correct Holland’s history of dangerous flying,<sup>70</sup> and accepted “full responsibility for not having prevented this...it was my duty to do so.”<sup>71</sup> In exchange for reduced sentencing, Colonel Pellerin pleaded guilty to two counts of dereliction of duty.<sup>72</sup>

## **92nd Wing Commanders**

Elizabeth Huston, Lieutenant Colonel Ken Huston’s widow, publicly wondered why the Air Force did not go higher in the chain of command to prosecute those responsible since they did not confront Holland after the previous (similar) two airshows.<sup>73</sup> She said Pellerin was a “scapegoat” and claimed the previous wing commander and B-52 pilot, Brigadier General Richards, encouraged the extreme and reckless flying. Having “permitted such dangerous maneuvers for years...[Holland] flew the exact same maneuvers the year before at the

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\*\* Lt Gen Griffith would retire from the Air Force in 1995 under allegations of having had an extramarital affair.

airshow...and [Richards] patted him on the back and said, ‘Way to go, Bud.’”<sup>74</sup>

However, in testimony to the crash investigation team, Brigadier General Richards said, “Holland never acted...anything other than totally professional...nothing I saw or knew led me to any other belief about Bud Holland.”<sup>75</sup> There is an obvious disconnect between these statements. Either Richards testimony is flawed, or he believed Holland’s flying was indeed “totally professional” – though one would assume the general, a B-52 pilot himself, would understand 80 degrees nose high exceeds the 15 degrees nose high limit in the B-52 technical order. But it is possible he did not know the full extent of Holland’s recklessness since Holland had never been formally reprimanded for his unsafe flying; the squadron and group commanders may never have brought the previous issues to his attention.

Brigadier General Richards relinquished command to Colonel William Brooks in August 1993 and retired in June 1996. No evidence exists Richards informed Brooks of Holland’s flying.

If Richards was dubiously unaware of the severity of Holland’s flying, Brooks was not. Concerned for safety, Colonel Brooks set specific (and incorrect) limits for Holland in the 1994 airshow – there would be no aerobatics. Brooks directed Holland to limit the flight to 45 degrees of bank and 25 degrees of pitch<sup>76</sup> (both exceed technical order limits: 30 degrees and 15 degrees respectively).

As part of a scheduled Base Realignment and Closure action, Brooks relinquished command of the 92nd Bomb Wing on 1 July 1994, six days after the accident. His next assignment as 2nd Bomb Wing Commander at Barksdale AFB was changed to a 12th Air Force staff position. He was never charged following the accident though he did receive a Letter of Reprimand (LOR) the details of which have not been publicly released.<sup>77</sup> In stark contrast to

accepting accountability, Brooks instead accepted immunity from prosecution in exchange for his testimony at Pellerin's court-martial.<sup>78</sup>

Colonel Brooks retired in April 1995 with full benefits<sup>79</sup> having not pinned on his Senate confirmed star<sup>80</sup> as a result of administrative actions following the 1994 Fairchild AFB crash.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter closes with three blatantly different accountability examples of three commanders in command on 24 June 1994. Lieutenant Colonel McGeehan confronted the issue, and Lieutenant Colonel Holland, head-on and in real time; he paid the ultimate price for his willingness to accept accountability for the safety of his crews.

Colonel Pellerin apparently struggled to summon the necessary leadership skills to ground Holland. However, in the end, Pellerin accepted full responsibility for his inaction and demonstrated a willingness to be held accountable through a guilty plea at his court-martial. Pellerin lost a future wing command and promising AF career.<sup>82</sup> Yet, one wonders why Lieutenant General Griffiths did not also recommend Colonel Brooks, the veritable "captain of the ship," for court-martial.

Colonel Brooks' willingness to accept immunity from prosecution in exchange for his testimony flies in the face of Pellerin and McGeehan. As the wing commander, he was obligated to provide factual information regarding his wing upon request, and not under the promise of immunity from prosecution. AF leadership disciplined Brooks with an LOR, withdrew his promotion to brigadier general, and withheld a third wing command opportunity. But his testimony against a former commander, to save himself, seems to tarnish his career and character more than does his truncated career.

*The U.S. Air Force has shot down its own credibility...  
the Air Force let Brooks escape accountability.*<sup>83\*</sup>

John Webster, The Spokesman Review

## Information Synthesis & Policy Recommendations

*The art of commanding military units is one of the few human endeavors that cannot be learned by taking courses leading to a degree in "Commandership." This good fortune can be attributed to the fact that command is very personal.*

- Roger H. Nye  
*The Challenge of Command*

### Analysis

Commanders and senior officers are relieved for essentially three reasons. The first is UCMJ infractions that result in formal discipline. It is important at this point to distinguish between accountability and discipline. As a subset of accountability, discipline is meted out for events in which the commander has personally done, or is complicit in, wrong-doing.

A second reason is the "loss of confidence in the leadership/command ability." This catchall is the most ambiguous and perhaps the most important tool in the senior commander's accountability toolbox. It is here we find the most underappreciated aspect of command – the senior officer in command is accountable for mission failures and misconduct of those under his command. To a higher standard, "we hold ourselves accountable to the American people."<sup>83</sup> As a senior DoD official noted, the more serious (and public) the issue, the more likely this will be invoked; the government must demonstrate the willingness to hold senior officials accountable as a tool for appeasing the demand for accountability and to "stop it as fast as possible."<sup>84</sup> It is for this reason the word scapegoat rises to the surface. If the issue is serious enough, it may cross an imaginary and inconsistent line in the political sand resulting in the third reason.

Some issues are so serious, political, and public, "Washington demands a senior officer be fired."<sup>85</sup> In the USAF, a senior officer is a colonel (O-6) and above. In Washington, however, senior officer is code for general officer. The number of USAF general officers is relatively small and statutorily limited. In the Air Force, no more than 43 officers may serve in



the grade of lieutenant general and above (of which only nine may be four-stars) and 73 in the grade of major general.<sup>86</sup> Producing new generals takes time – especially three- and four-stars. Therefore, firing a general officer is “usually intended to protect the real high ups”<sup>87</sup> by limiting accountability to the lowest general rank possible.

### **Norms of Accountability**

In peacetime, the captain of a Navy ship which runs aground or collides with another ship can expect to be relieved dockside upon return. Virtually nothing he can say will change this outcome.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, a court-martial is all but automatic for a soldier or marine who loses his weapon.<sup>89</sup> But such standardized conventions in accountability are rare – and this is good; relieving a commander or senior leader is a serious matter. Time, investigation, and deliberation must be given their due. A consequence, however, is the impression of an ad hoc process.

### **Accountability Avoided?**

Incomplete publicly available information raises the question, “Did two commanders, Lieutenant General Elder, 8th AF/CC and Colonel Brooks, 92nd BW/CC deliberately avoid accountability?” The answer is likely “no.”

In the Minot-Barksdale nuclear incident, Lieutenant General Elder avoided all consequences. In testimony and personal discussions with AWC personnel in 2007, Elder stated skip-echelon was the only thing that saved him from being relieved. With no further explanation, one runs the risk of misevaluating this statement and inferring Lieutenant General Elder intentionally “hid behind skip-echelon to save his own butt.”<sup>90</sup> Though at first it seems counter-intuitive a NAF commander would be outside the operational lines of command, his commanders agreed skip-echelon protected him from accountability. Given the odd command relationship, the AF probably got this one right; an Airman was not wrongly held accountable.

In response to the erosion of the nuclear enterprise, the Air Force created Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) on 7 Aug 2009.<sup>91</sup> Also, 8th Air Force was restored to its former WWII glory as a combatant NAF responsible for operations, training, and maintenance – no more skip-echelon.<sup>92</sup>

A search of the public record did not reveal Colonel Brooks was held to account following the 1994 B-52 crash at Fairchild. Though some websites did allude to his withheld promotion to brigadier general and withdrawn assignment to a third wing command, the vast majority of the public splash revolved around the deaths and Colonel Pellerin's court-martial. Court testimony, which is not in the public record and must be requested from AF/JA, demonstrate Brooks was indeed held accountable for his complicity in the event. But, once again, the lack of correct and complete information results in skewed perceptions.

Event	Name	Position	Relieved /Fired	Other Consequence	NJP	O-5	O-6	O-7+
Minot-Barksdale	Wheeler	2nd BW/CC	No	Yes	Unk	X		
	Emig	5th BW/CC	Yes	No	Unk		X	
	Elder	8th AF/CC	No <sup>1</sup>	No	No			X
	Moseley	CSAF	Yes <sup>2</sup>	Yes	Yes <sup>3</sup>			X
Fairchild Crash	McGeehan	325 BMS/CC	No	Yes <sup>4</sup>	No	X		
	Pellerin	92nd OG/CC	Yes	Yes <sup>5</sup>	Unk		X	
	Brooks	92nd Wg/CC	No	Yes <sup>6</sup>	Yes <sup>7</sup>			Sel <sup>8</sup>
<sup>1</sup> Skip-echelon. <sup>2</sup> SECDEF asked Gen Moseley to resign – many issues contributed, not exclusively the M-B incident. <sup>3</sup> LOR after retirement – not related to M-B incident. <sup>4</sup> Paid with his life. <sup>5</sup> Court-martialed. <sup>6</sup> Wing command assignment changed. <sup>7</sup> Promotion to Brig General withdrawn. <sup>8</sup> Letter of Reprimand.								

Table 2.

Nevertheless, the author's question, "Why was Colonel Pellerin court-martialed and not the wing commander," remains unanswered. Furthermore, the author asserts commanders have the obligation to testify to events under their command without promise of immunity from prosecution. Yet, both are beyond the scope of this paper and fall into the realm of the law.



## Policy Recommendations

Every situation is unique. Accountability is situation dependent and, to a large measure, subjective. These complexities are the very elements which require thinking officers, commanders, and senior civilian leadership to attend to all the necessary facts and expeditiously conclude accountability actions against commanders and senior officers. Through investigation into these case studies, it appears the Air Force gets senior leader accountability right much of the time. Any delay or incomplete information, however, results in the appearance of inconsistently applied standards of accountability at best,<sup>93</sup> and cover-up at worst.

1. AFIs require wings hold quarterly Status of Discipline (SOD) meetings. Wing commanders generally use these as instructional opportunities for subordinate commanders to openly discuss the nature of discipline to specific infractions. However, SODs are almost entirely devoid of officer discipline. If they do, rarely is discipline discussed of officers more senior than lieutenants. Furthermore, at PME and commander's courses, officers receive little more than commentary on AF core values when instructed on accountability and receive no formal training in discipline.<sup>94</sup>

**Recommendation.** Add specific training and education to IDE/SDE and commander's courses using real-world historical examples. Do not develop an "accountability AFI." Commanders need the flexibility to evaluate details and take actions without the limitations of yet another AFI. The JA is available to navigate the specifics of the law.

2. Institutional transparency versus privacy is a delicate balance. However, the lack of forthright public release results in inaccurate information dominating public discourse. The DoD releases

daily public statements. In the research for this paper, the author found press-briefing transcripts from the Minot-Barksdale nuclear incident. However, information was deliberately redacted to protect the privacy of individuals. The result is the appearance of cover-up. By not openly addressing this issue, misinformation dominates the public media.

**Recommendation.** Continue to protect the privacy of individuals however release the specifics of actions taken. A page of information detailing the position, rank, action taken, and the reason for stated action would be sufficient. Provide details why measures did not go further up the chain and why general officers were not held accountable.

3. According to AFIs, skip-echelon advises manpower, not command authority.

**Recommendation.** Ensure operational chain of command never skips echelons. Airmen and US citizens have the right to expect continuity of command from flight to CSAF. Skip-echelon, as interpreted in the Minot-Barksdale situation, undermines command authority and leads to the impression general officers are held to a different standard, if at all.

## Conclusion

“Every high profile incident...is different.” However, failure to “adequately define, explain or uniformly apply accountability standards” continues to fuel the perception accountability is inconsistent and ad hoc. “When one has access to all the facts, it is clear Air Force senior leaders are attempting to [consistently apply accountability standards]...but most AF members [don’t have access to the facts and] rely on the *Air Force Times*” for information.<sup>95</sup>

Implementing these recommendations would significantly improve understanding of accountability and discipline in the officer corps and ensure public confidence in DoD accountability transparency.

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- Also, Discussion with a retired Air Force officer and Air War College staff member, 4 October 2011.
- <sup>55</sup> Daryl C. McClary, "U.S. Air Force B-52 crashes at Fairchild Air Force Base," HistoryLink.org essay, August 08, 2008, [http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=8716](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8716).
- <sup>56</sup> Major Anthony T. Kern, USAF, "Darker Shades of Blue," (monograph, United States Air Force Academy), 1995, 11-12.
- <sup>57</sup> Anthony T. Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999), Introduction.
- <sup>58</sup> Major Anthony T. Kern, USAF, "Darker Shades of Blue," (monograph, United States Air Force Academy), 1995, 15.
- <sup>59</sup> Major Anthony T. Kern, USAF, "Darker Shades of Blue," (monograph, United States Air Force Academy), 1995, 21.
- <sup>60</sup> Daryl C. McClary, "U.S. Air Force B-52 crashes at Fairchild Air Force Base," HistoryLink.org essay, August 08, 2008, [http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=8716](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8716).
- <sup>61</sup> Pat McGeehan, eldest of Lt Col Mark McGeehan's three sons, blog comment, 12 September 2007, [http://rob.com/pix/B52\\_crash/B52CRSH2](http://rob.com/pix/B52_crash/B52CRSH2).
- <sup>62</sup> Major Anthony T. Kern, USAF, "Darker Shades of Blue," (monograph, United States Air Force Academy), 1995, 22.
- <sup>63</sup> *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 19.
- <sup>64</sup> Major Anthony T. Kern, USAF, "Darker Shades of Blue," (monograph, United States Air Force Academy), 1995, 25-26.
- <sup>65</sup> *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 41.
- <sup>66</sup> Anthony T. Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999), 33.
- <sup>67</sup> Jim Camden, "Air Force Reschedules Court-Martial," *The Spokesman-Review*, 19 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/19/air-force-reschedules-court-martial-for-today-col/>.
- <sup>68</sup> Jim Camden, "Air Force Reschedules Court-Martial," *The Spokesman-Review*, 19 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/19/air-force-reschedules-court-martial-for-today-col/>.
- <sup>69</sup> Daryl C. McClary, "U.S. Air Force B-52 crashes at Fairchild Air Force Base," HistoryLink.org essay, August 08, 2008, [http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=8716](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8716).
- <sup>70</sup> Jim Camden, "Officer Pleads Guilty in Fairchild B-52 Crash," *The Spokesman-Review*, 20 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/20/officer-pleads-guilty-in-fairchild-b-52-crash/>.



- <sup>71</sup> Jim Camden, "Air Force Reprimands, Fines Colonel Officer", *The Spokesman-Review*, 23 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/23/air-force-reprimands-fines-colonel-officer-who/>.
- <sup>72</sup> Jim Camden, "Officer Pleads Guilty in Fairchild B-52 Crash," *The Spokesman-Review*, 20 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/20/officer-pleads-guilty-in-fairchild-b-52-crash/>.
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- <sup>74</sup> Daryl C. McClary, "U.S. Air Force B-52 crashes at Fairchild Air Force Base," HistoryLink.org essay, August 08, 2008, [http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=8716](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=8716).
- <sup>75</sup> Anthony T. Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999), 20.
- <sup>76</sup> *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 12 and 15.
- <sup>77</sup> *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 27 and 42.
- <sup>78</sup> Lt Gen Thomas R. Griffith to Col William C. Brooks, memorandum: Grant of Testimonial Immunity in the case *US v. Pellerin*.  
 "This grant of immunity means that nothing you say as a result of and pursuant to this grant of immunity can be used against you in a trial by court-martial except...for perjury, false swearing, or for a false official statement."
- <sup>79</sup> John Webster, "Air Force Hush Job Skips Accountability," 25 May 1995, *The Spokesman-Review*, [www.spokesman.com/staff/john-webster/?page=17](http://www.spokesman.com/staff/john-webster/?page=17).
- <sup>80</sup> Jim Camden, "Air Force Reprimands, Fines Colonel Officer", *The Spokesman-Review*, 23 May 1995, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1995/may/23/air-force-reprimands-fines-colonel-officer-who/>.
- <sup>81</sup> *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 43.
- <sup>82</sup> Col Pellerin had been selected as the Commander of the 100th Air Wing at Mildenhall AFB. *United States v. Pellerin*, in *USAF court-martial verbatim testimony of Colonel William C. Brooks*, 22 November 1994, 18 and 37.
- <sup>83</sup> Maj Gen Newton, USAF, DoD Press Briefing with from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va., October 19, 2007, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4067>.
- <sup>84</sup> Interview with a senior department of defense official, 2011.
- <sup>85</sup> Interview with a senior department of defense official, 2011.
- <sup>86</sup> United States Code, Title 10, Subtitle A, Part II, Chapter 32, §525, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/search/pagedetails.action;jsessionid=4qZYTxFhn5MY2ynjWQbkws0JHKvQ86NnTrRZvGkncM1MyXZwTvry!1017916514!1244950297?browsePath=Title+10%2FSubtitle+A%2FPart+II%2FChapter+32%2FSec.+525&granuleId=USCODE-2010-title10-subtitleA-partII-chap32-sec525&packageId=USCODE-2010-title10&collapse=true&fromBrowse=true>
- <sup>87</sup> Interview with a senior department of defense official, 2011.
- <sup>88</sup> Discussions with naval officers at Air War College, AY12.
- <sup>89</sup> Discussions with former Army and Marine commanding officers at Air War College, AY12.
- <sup>90</sup> Discussion with a retired Air Force officer and Air War College staff member, 4 October 2011.
- <sup>91</sup> Peter Grier, "The Nuclear Wakeup Call," *Air Force Magazine*, June 2008, 53, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2008/June%202008/0608nuclear.pdf>.
- <sup>92</sup> Lt Gen (retired) Robert Elder, interview with the author, 2 Dec 2011.
- <sup>93</sup> Lt Col Jackie R. Tillery, "Accountability: Inconsistent, Situation dependent and Subjective," April 1997, (Professional Studies Paper, Air War College), 38.
- <sup>94</sup> The author is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, and as of this writing, has completed 65% of the Air War College curriculum. In all three, officer accountability has been loosely discussed and never strays into actual, recent events. The typical response to the "hallway survey" question, "What does 'lost confidence in the command/leadership ability of officer \_\_\_\_'" results in educated guesses, but no concrete, universal response. Understanding of this subject seems poor.
- <sup>95</sup> Lt Col Jackie R. Tillery, "Accountability: Inconsistent, Situation dependent and Subjective," April 1997, (Professional Studies Paper, Air War College), 38, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/gettrdoc?location=us&doc=gettrdoc.pdf&ad=ada39793>.